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*J.R.R. Tolkien, Romanticist and Poet.* Julian Eilmann. Translated by Evelyn Koch

**Additional Keywords**  
German Romanticism

## EVIEWWS

**J.R.R. TOLKIEN, ROMANTICIST AND POET.** Julian Eilmann. Translated by Evelyn Koch. Zurich: Walking Tree, 2017. Cormarë Series No. 36. iii + 474 p. ISBN 9783905703368. paperback. \$32.00.

BETWEEN 2005 AND 2015, JULIAN EILMANN AUTHORED ten papers on J.R.R. Tolkien as an author and poet rooted in the Romanticist mind-set, an area which he identified as neglected yet important to the understanding of Tolkien's literary and philosophical influences and aims. The papers developed into Eilmann's 2016 doctoral thesis at Friedrich-Schiller-University in Jena, which in turn blossomed into his German monograph, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Romantiker und Lyriker* (Oldib Verlag, 2016). *J.R.R. Tolkien, Romanticist and Poet* is that monograph's English translation by Evelyn Koch, published as part of Walking Tree's excellent and always engaging Cormarë series, an important imprint for, among other areas of Tolkien studies, English translations of non-English language Tolkien scholarship. Eilmann's work is a welcome and important addition to this series.

Eilmann aims to convince his reader that Tolkien is no less than "one of the most influential mediators of the Romanticist world view" (324) due to the enduring popularity of his Middle-earth fiction into the twenty-first century. Eilmann defines this Romanticist world view, or *Weltanschauung*, as a "turn to the transcendent and marvellous, from which results the Romantic longing for a poetisation of a, from the point of view of the modern subject, disenchanted world" (431). Eilmann begins his long argument with introductory chapters describing the scope of his research and his methodology. Then, the majority of the book is divided into two major sections. The first of these discusses the nature of German Romanticism (1790-c.1850) and Tolkien's role as an inheritor of Romanticist ideals. The second major section applies the poetics of Romanticism to Tolkien's poetry and conception of music in Middle-earth. Eilmann then briefly presents his conclusions and suggests directions for future research.

In Part One: "Introduction," Eilmann sets forth his main argument, "that Tolkien can be understood as a poet of the Romanticist mind-set whose often underestimated poetry [...] plays an important role in highlighting the Romanticist foundation of his complete works" (5). Eilmann seeks to fill a perceived gap in Tolkien studies (9), as well as represent a non-Anglo-American

viewpoint in the field (14). Eilmann notes that Tolkien is largely identified as either a medievalist (5) or a modernist (6), but these two prevalent critical lenses should not obscure other approaches to Tolkien's legendarium. He writes, "In fact, different approaches are desirable as far as they can widen our understanding of his texts, and illustrate the different ways of approaching these texts in literary studies" (7). He contends that research has not fully acknowledged the extent to which Tolkien is rooted in the Romantic tradition of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Eilmann's own monograph approaches Romanticism "from a decidedly German point of view" (13), although he does not completely discount the English Romantics, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Percy Bysshe Shelley (13), or their inheritors, Lord Dunsany and George MacDonald, among others, who served as English mediators of German Romanticism (14).

Eilmann's study rests on two main pillars: I.) that Tolkien's work is foundationally-based on German Romanticism, and II.) that Tolkien's songs and poems are exemplary models of Romanticist topoi. His first challenge comes with any attempt to define German Romanticism. As Gerhard Schulz concludes from the heterogeneity of Romanticist texts, "there is no Romanticism in terms of an aesthetic programme or a regular period taking its course; and all the more, there are no Romanticists" (qtd. 44). Nevertheless, a generally-accepted cadre of authors includes Novalis, Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel, Ludwig Tieck, Joseph von Eichendorff, and E.T.A. Hoffman (42). Their works can be linked by a common "longing for infinity and transcendence" (51), a desire for the marvelous, and poetic enchantment which rejects a solely materialistic worldview (17-18). Günther Safranski identifies a shared "appetite for mystery and wonder" (qtd. 51). These ideas emerged in reaction to the disenchantment of the scientific Age of Enlightenment (c.1715-1789). Likewise, Tolkien's longing for the marvelous has been called a reaction to the disenchantment of rapid industrialization in Victorian England. Eilmann writes, "Tolkien's fantasy too is characterised by an explicit desire for (re-)enchantment which is expressed particularly by the protagonists' intensive longing for the realm of Faery" (18). This desire for re-enchantment is linked to Tolkien's concept of "Recovery," the regaining of a clear view of the marvelous in everyday life, as expressed in his essay "On Fairy-Stories" (432).

The balance of Part One sets out Eilmann's methodology and research approach, and introduces Tolkien's historical antecedents. He defines and contextualizes key concepts such as "Romanticism," *Sehnsucht* (yearning, longing, wistful desire), and *Weltanschauung* (world view), and lays out his plan for the remainder of the book. He writes, "Generally, it is difficult to establish if Tolkien read works by English or German Romanticists at all [...]. In the absence of available information about Tolkien's knowledge of Romantic authors, the

evidence of a Romanticist view of the world can only be gathered from his texts themselves" (13-14). Thus, Eilmann considers Tolkien's biography and acknowledged literary influences, but his primary approach is close reading of Tolkien's poetry and Middle-earth writings in order to identify Romanticist motifs (14).

In Part Two: "The Romanticist," Eilmann "shows the impact of the literary fantasy tradition on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (14). And now readers come to an unexpected joy and an unexpected frustration. First, the unexpected joy. Eilmann's book serves not only as an explication of the Romanticist underpinnings in Tolkien's work, but also as an excellent primer on the major influence of Romanticism on the foundations of British fantasy literature overall. In fact, Eilmann's non-fiction treatment could easily serve as an introductory textbook for a course on the subject which could be naturally paired with Douglas A. Anderson's excellent short story collections, *Tales Before Tolkien* (Del Rey, 2003) and *Tales Before Narnia* (Del Rey, 2008). Both authors utilize examples from German Romanticists Ludwig Tieck and Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, and English neo-Romanticists E. Nesbit, William Morris, Lord Dunsany, Kenneth Morris, and George MacDonald. (Eilmann also discusses E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Golden Pot," an influential novella Anderson covered in lectures for Signum University on Tolkien's precursors).

Part Two, Chapter One begins with Eilmann's introduction to the nature of German Romanticism, both the philosophy and its expression in some literary examples by Novalis, William Schlegel, and Heinrich Heine, and visual interpretations by the painter Caspar David Friedrich. Chapter Two examines Romanticist poetology (i.e. "poetics," the theory of poetry), and its intersections with Tolkien's own poetology, as best expressed in the famous essay "On Fairy-stories," as well as "Smith of Wootton Major," a lengthy essay accompanying Tolkien's short story of the same name.

Part Two, Chapter Three explores some British fantasies which were heavily influenced by German Romanticism. William Morris's nineteenth-century fantasies, Edith Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle* (1907), and Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1862) are briefly noted as Romanticist precursors to Tolkien. Lord Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter* (1924) and Kenneth Morris' "Sion ap Siencyn" (1921) are dealt with more in-depth as examples of twentieth-century Tolkien contemporaries who were also drawn to the Romantic desire for the marvelous and the infinite. But it is George MacDonald's novel, *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women* (1858), which takes center stage here as the quintessential example of Victorian Neo-Romanticism. MacDonald (1824-1905), the Scottish Congregational minister and pioneering author of fantasy literature, was a major influence on the young J.R.R. Tolkien. Anderson notes that Tolkien "knew well MacDonald's children's books *The*

*Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*, both of which influenced Tolkien's depiction of goblins in *The Hobbit*" (*Tales Before Tolkien*, 21). However, later in life, Tolkien's admiration for MacDonald cooled considerably. He told an interviewer in 1965, "I now find that I can't stand George MacDonald's books at any price at all" (qtd. in Anderson 22). Nevertheless, Tolkien's admiration for MacDonald in his formative years as a writer can be seen in similarities between their poetological essays, MacDonald's "The Imagination: Its Functions and Culture" (1867) and "The Fantastic Imagination" (1893), and Tolkien's "On Fairy-stories," which Eilmann compares side-by-side (183-193). In one example, MacDonald's idea of the poet as a "maker" resonates deeply with Tolkien's concept of the "sub-creator" (187). Both men related such concepts to a natural, human occupation for creating, as MacDonald put it, "a little world [...] with its own laws" ("The Fantastic Imagination"). Eilmann then explores expressions of German Romanticism in MacDonald's *Phantastes*: how the protagonist, Anodos, transcends the mundane by entering Faery, encounters the marvelous (e.g. a bedroom that turns into a forest, talking flowers, a stone statue which springs to life), and ultimately finds meaning through self-sacrifice. Each of these elements Tolkien also used, for instance, in *The Hobbit*, where the mundane Bilbo Baggins enters Faery (Mirkwood), encounters the marvelous (e.g. a talking purse, stone giants, and a dragon), and finds meaning through self-sacrifice. Eilmann writes, "By incorporating poetological ideas of German Romanticism [...] and by expressing the Romantic desire for the marvellous, MacDonald mediates between German Romanticism as a historical period and its successors in the field of fantasy such as Dunsany and Tolkien" (175). Altogether, it's a wonderful overview of the chain of ideas from German Romanticism, through MacDonald, and down to Tolkien.

Now for the unexpected frustration. It is not until Part Two, Chapter Four where the reader finally encounters an in-depth exploration of Tolkien as a Romanticist writer. The first 235 pages of the book (a full fifty percent), are an extended prelude to this chapter. It is not an unnecessary prelude, particularly for those lacking a strong background in German Romanticism—and Eilmann does work Tolkien into his text prior to this point—but it takes over two hundred pages before the book's attention is unambiguously focused upon Tolkien. Here, Eilmann analyzes Tolkien's late story, *Smith of Wootton Major*, the Eriol frame story from *The Book of Lost Tales* (Tolkien's earliest attempt at creating a mythology), and some of Tolkien's early poetry from the 1910s and 1920s, which Eilmann calls "distinctly steeped in Romanticist motifs" (5). These are fitting examples of the chain of ideas emanating from German Romanticism, through MacDonald, and down to Tolkien. A particularly poignant example is the repeated motif of the *Rückenfigur* ("figure from the back") who, looking through an open window on an enchanting landscape, catches a glimpse of

Faërie. In Joseph von Eichendorff's poem, "*Sehnsucht*" ("Desire," 1834), the speaker remarks, "Lonely at the window I stood / And heard from afar / A post horn in the quiet land. / The heart in my body started to burn, / So I thought secretly to myself: / Alas, who were able to travel with them / In the splendid summer night!" (qtd. in Eilmann 273). MacDonald's Anodos is likewise captivated: "But as soon as I looked out of the window, a gush of wonderment and longing flowed over my soul like the tide of a great sea. Fairy Land lay before me, and drew me towards it with an irresistible attraction. The trees bathed their great heads in the waves of the morning [...]" (qtd. in Eilmann 275). Tolkien's Eriol is also enchanted at this liminal boundary between the mundane and the marvelous—

Ere he laid him down however Eriol opened the window and scent of flowers gusted in therethrough, and a glimpse he caught of a *shadow-filled garden that was full of trees* [...] and a nightingale sang suddenly in a tree nearby. Then slept Eriol, and through his dreams there came a *music thinner and more pure than any he heard before, and it was full of longing* [...] and Eriol longed in his sleep for he knew not what. (qtd. 272; Eilmann's italics)

In each of these examples, a desire for wonder is provoked by sensory stimulation received through an open window: the sound of a distant horn, the morning light playing on treetops, the scent of flowers, the song of a nightingale or a fairy piper.

Eilmann concludes this first major pillar of his argument with an analysis of nostalgia in Tolkien's writings. He explores this Romantic emotional state on three levels: the geographical nostalgia for a distant place, like Bilbo's recurrent longing for his comfortable home in *The Hobbit*; the historical nostalgia for a vanished past, such as Gimli's wistfulness in Khazad-dûm for the glorious era of Durin's kingdom; and the "existential homesickness" of humankind for the eternal and transcendent, exemplified by the longing for immortality of the mortal woman Andreth in Tolkien's posthumously published *Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth*. Eilmann writes that this third form of nostalgia "stands in a clear relationship with the Romanticist world view" (296). Nowhere is this existential homesickness more apparent than in Tolkien's poetry and song, which he frequently uses to express *Sehnsucht* for magical and mystical elements which are always just out of reach. Tolkien's early poems (c.1915-c.1924) are frequently voiced by lonely mortals impotently longing to follow representatives of Faërie as they recede into the distance, be they gnomes disappearing around a bend in "Goblin Feet" (1915; see 300-303), fairy boats sailing to blessed islands in "The Happy Mariners" (1915; see 309-312), the lost childhood of "You and Me and the Cottage of Lost Play" (1915; see 312-316), or the fading elves of "Kortirion among the Trees" (1915). Eilmann writes:

As we can see, in “Kortirion among the Trees”, Tolkien’s Romantic view of the world is especially visible. The poem is a nostalgic lament, in which the fading away of a Poetic Age is mourned, in which there used to be representatives of the transcendent, “the holy fairies and immortal elves”, who enchanted man with their presence. Herein, a strong longing for the marvellous is articulated; and the poem thus stands in the tradition of the Romantic sorrow about the disenchantment of the world. (323)

Eilmann observes that even in “Over Old Hills and Far Away” (1915-16), where Tolkien’s narrator leaves his home to chase the fairy piper, Tinfang Warble, “whether ‘Elvenhome’ is reached [...] and whether enduring happiness can be found there, is suspensefully left open” (309). Compelling examples such as these—the longing engendered by a glimpse of Faery through an open window, and the nostalgic lament for a vanishing symbol of the marvelous—convincingly support Eilmann’s thesis.

Part Three: “The Poet,” is an often-delightful exploration of the functions and uses of poetry, music, and song in Middle-earth, and how these express the Romanticist world view. Chapter One reviews criticism of Tolkien as a poet, and argues for the essential nature of poetry in his novels. In a 1968 letter to Margaret Carroux, German translator of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien wrote, “[The poems and songs in *LotR*] are an integral part of the narrative (and of the delineation of the characters) and not a separable ‘decoration’ like pictures by another artist” (qtd. 331). Chapter Two considers poetry and song as cultural communication in *The Lord of the Rings*: “The social fabric of Middle-earth is made up of various cultures in which an oral transmission of culture and knowledge is predominant, and in turn verses are of crucial significance here” (340). Poetry may contain folk wisdom, as does the verse on *athelas*, or convey history and prophecies, as do Malbeth the seer’s words, or bind groups together, in the way Théoden and Éomer use poetic speech to inspire the Rohirrim to battle, and Hobbits use walking and drinking songs to celebrate shared social occasions. Using Aragorn’s recitation of the “Song of Beren and Lúthien,” Eilmann argues for the transcendent power of poetry in Middle-earth:

Against the background of Romanticist poetology, the “Song of Beren and Lúthien” enables the reader to be enchanted by the poetic world and its historic depths, just like the protagonists of the novels are. Since Aragorn also conveys his own love story in a poetical guise to the listeners with the song of Lúthien, he also refers to the future at the same time [...]. Thus, the song transcends time and space [...]. (344-345)



Eilmann notes that poetry and song play key roles in the events of Middle-earth since it is a world literally created from music. Tom Bombadil's singing saves the hobbits from Old Man Willow and the Barrow-wight, and Sam's singing in Cirith Ungol makes it possible for him to locate and rescue Frodo.

Part Three, Chapter Three continues the exploration of magic and song. The house of Tom Bombadil is one such place in Middle-earth where the two are inextricably one. Tom and his wife Goldberry literally enchant the hobbits with their songs. Goldberry's singing assuages the hobbits' fears of the Old Forest, and evokes in their minds calming images of pools and water. Tom's songs of days past literally ensPELL the hobbits, who lose all sense of time while listening. Tom's only mode of communication appears to be through song and dance which, Eilmann argues, "suggest[s] he lives in harmony with the poetic structure of the cosmos" (375). The hobbits, too, begin communicating by singing in Tom's house, which there seems easier and more natural than mere talking. Eilmann summarizes that in Tolkien's world, "Poetry is superior to profane, mundane communication—a truly Romantic insight" (376). The next section, on the ethical use of "songs of power," is perhaps the weakest, as Eilmann's discussion seems unnecessarily drawn-out, and his conclusions self-evident. Songs of power are used by both evil characters (e.g. Sauron, Old Man Willow, the Barrow-wight) and good (e.g. Finrod Felagund and Lúthien Tinúviel), so should readers consider the wielding of power through magical verse an inherent evil or a possible good? Eilmann's obvious conclusion is that it depends on the singer's intentions. He wraps up this section with a fascinating exploration of the relationship between music, magic, and water in Middle-earth. In the *Silmarillion*, it is said, "in water there lives yet the echo of the Music of the Ainur more than any substance else that is in this Earth; and many of the Children of Ilúvatar hearken still unsated to the voices of the Sea, and yet know not for what they listen" (quoted on 398). Thus, the sea-longing that strikes Elves (and a few mortals such as Tuor and Bilbo), is the same existential homesickness for paradise and eternity that nostalgic verse can incite. Here, Eilmann circles back to his Romanticist themes, which have been absent for many pages during his explorations of the function of poetry in Middle-earth. He writes, "Tuor and other enthusiasts of the sea suffer their whole lives from the insatiable desire to repeat the transcendental experience once had. [...] Not without reason is Tuor reminiscent of the quixotic individuals who we encounter in many novels of Romanticism" (401). In the fragmentary "Ælfwine of England," found in *The Book of Lost Tales, Volume Two*, Ælfwine has just such a transcendental experience at sea when a strange wind "full of scented memories" wafts over his ship, and "The mists gave before that gentle wind, and a thin moon they might see riding in its tattered shreds, until behind it soon a thousand cool stars peered forth in the dark" (qtd. 404). Like the lone figure who glimpses Faery through an open

window, Ælfwine momentarily catches the scent and sight of the infinite and marvelous, Elvenhome. Like George MacDonald's *Anodos*, Ælfwine sets out to recapture that transcendent moment once again. Eilmann concludes his survey of poetry in Middle-earth with an exploration of poetry in *The Hobbit*. Here, the book shows its origins as separate academic papers, as the chapters or sections can feel like a series of loosely-connected ideas, rather than a harmonious whole. This chapter, for instance, has a tacked-on-at-the-end feeling, as if Eilmann didn't know where to put it. Actually, it would have fit more comfortably alongside Part Three, Chapter Two on poetry and song as cultural communication in *The Lord of the Rings*, since it reaches the same conclusions, that is, that verses in *The Hobbit* also convey and transmit a variety of cultural information. But the intervening sections on songs of power and magic, and on water as the universal conductor of poetry, disconnect this chapter from its logical position in Eilmann's overall argument. The placement of this last chapter also causes Eilmann to end his text on an anti-climax. His main argument would have been much more powerful had it concluded with the discussion that links transcendentalism in Tolkien's poetry to its relationship with water. As the world of Middle-earth began in music and water, so this book should have ended there. Overall, Part Three could have benefitted from a little judicious rearranging and tying it more closely to Part Two on Tolkien's Romanticism. And yet, it is a delightful section with many compelling ideas on Tolkien's poetry that will stay with the reader like the strains of a beautiful song.

One further frustration is the significant number of typographical errors throughout the volume. The following are just a few examples. Eilmann states that Tolkien "was born in 1882," rather than 1892 (128). The phrases "Those kind sof experiences" (233) and "These Romanticist elements we be dealt with in the following" (238) are obvious typos. Sometimes these errors are inadvertently humorous, as when Eilmann quotes Théoden's call to battle, "Arise now, arise, Riders of Théoden! Dire dees awake [...]" (quoted on 346), or Galadriel's song of farewell, "Ah! Like golf fall the leaves in the wind [...]" (quoted on 320). This last is shortly followed by "the farewell of the 'fairies' und the poetic magic of Kortirion" (320). Like this last example, and some odd turns of phrase throughout, some errors are no doubt due to the book's translation from German. These are mostly of the slight and slightly annoying variety, but there are enough of them to serve as a general distraction from Eilmann's otherwise smooth, well-researched, and intelligent writing. Finally, rounding off the book is a brief summary of his arguments and evidence, and suggestions for future research into the Romanticist mind-sets of C.S. Lewis and the T.C.B.S., the group of Tolkien's friends formed while they were students together at King Edward's School.

This is a good-sized tome, and Eilmann takes his time building a meticulous and detailed argument. That, and the focus on some of Tolkien's lesser-known works, such as the *Book of Lost Tales*, early poetry, and *Smith of Wootton Major*, will make Tolkien specialists the primary audience for this book. General readers interested in briefer treatments of the influence of German Romanticism on Tolkien's thought and writing may prefer Frank Bergmann's article, "The Roots of Tolkien's Tree: The Influence of George MacDonald and German Romanticism Upon Tolkien's Essay 'On Fairy-Stories.'" Other works which contextualize Tolkien with Romanticism include R.J. O'Reilly's *Romantic Religion: A Study of Owen Barfield, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, J.R.R. Tolkien, William Gray's Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth: Tales of Pullman, Lewis, Tolkien, MacDonald and Hoffmann*, and Oliver Bidlo's German language *Sehnsucht nach Mittelerde?*, for which Eilmann has written a new preface.

Overall, despite the typographical errors, odd translations, and the awkward sequencing of the final chapters, *J.R.R. Tolkien, Romanticist and Poet* is an instant classic in the field of Tolkien studies, one that draws attention to the important influence of Romanticism on Tolkien's writing and world-building. It also serves as a succinct primer on German Romanticism and its influence on the development of British fantasy literature, with important sections on George MacDonald, Lord Dunsany, and other early British fantasists who mediated German Romanticism for Tolkien. The influence of Romanticism on Tolkien is not an entirely new concept, but it is an area which has not received its fair share of scholarly attention. With the publication of Eilmann's book in English, perhaps that will change.

Julian Eilmann is also the co-editor, with Allan Turner, of *Tolkien's Poetry* (Walking Tree, 2013), and a contributor to *Hither Shore* journal and other Tolkien-related publications.

—Kris Swank

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